
Government of the District of Columbia



Metropolitan Police Department

Testimony of
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District of Columbia Consolidated Laboratory Facility

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Committee on Government Reform
Representative Tom Davis, Chair
Representative Henry Waxman, Ranking Member

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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, staff and guests. Thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning concerning the District of Columbia Consolidated Laboratory Facility and what the lab will mean for crime fighting and crime prevention in our nation's capital. Deputy Mayor Reiskin has provided you with a detailed update on the planning and implementation of the proposed lab, and he has articulated, quite clearly and convincingly, why such a facility – dedicated to the needs and priorities of the Metropolitan Police Department and other DC government agencies – is so crucial to the health and safety of our city. I will not repeat what the Deputy Mayor has already laid out for the Committee. However, I would like to amplify a few key points, especially as they relate to the Metropolitan Police Department's mission of crime solving and crime prevention.

Over the years, advancements in DNA analysis and other forensics technology have provided law enforcement with tremendous benefits in the short-term, as well as amazing promise and potential for the future. While television has certainly popularized the importance of DNA to modern crime fighting, law enforcement agencies across the country can point to any number of real-life cases that have been solved through the use of DNA analysis. Earlier this year here in the District, we closed a 23-year-old murder case based largely on DNA evidence.

But entertainment programs such as "CSI" and "Law and Order" gloss over one very important reality: to take full advantage of DNA technology, agencies need the resources – bricks-and-mortar, specialized equipment and highly trained staff – to do the job. Unfortunately, the District of Columbia has been behind the curve – far behind the curve, for a long period of time – when it comes to harnessing the power of DNA technology. During the 1970s, 80s and 90s, when other jurisdictions were investing in building or expanding the capacity of their crime labs, the District continued to rely on the federal government to handle most of our lab operations. In recent years, it has become clear to everyone – the Mayor, the DC Council, the MPD, other health and safety agencies, and certainly our residents – that this situation is no longer tenable.

To support our crime fighting efforts, the District needs its own dedicated crime laboratory, and we need a laboratory that is capable of taking full advantage of the latest in DNA and other forensics technologies. As you heard from the Deputy Mayor, we are finally moving in that direction, with plans under way to construct a consolidated laboratory that will include a fully functional crime lab to support the MPD and other agencies.

The Metropolitan Police Department appreciates the crime lab support and resources provided by the FBI and other federal agencies over the years. The FBI, in particular, has been a gracious and steady partner in analyzing evidence for our Department and, more recently, in providing space and resources for a small number of dedicated MPD technicians to work on District cases at the FBI lab. But I understand that the FBI has its own needs and its own priorities when it comes to allocating the finite resources of its crime lab. And since the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, the demands on the FBI Crime Lab have certainly expanded and their priorities have necessarily shifted. I know it can be difficult and frustrating for a crime victim in DC, or the survivor of a homicide victim, to be told that forensic analysis on their case may be delayed because the FBI Crime Lab is focusing on other priorities that come first. But that's the reality we face under the current situation.

A dedicated DC crime lab is essential for both day-to-day crime fighting, as well as homeland security in the National Capital Region. The reality is that, should there be a future terrorist strike in the District of Columbia, we would need not only the FBI Crime Lab, but other forensic facilities to be involved in the myriad tasks associated with such a catastrophic event. In this scenario, a dedicated DC crime lab would promote much-needed coordination among police investigators, local health officials and the medical examiner's office, while continuing to ensure that evidence from local crimes – homicides, sexual assaults, robberies and others – is still being analyzed in a timely fashion.

In your invitation letter, Mr. Chairman, you asked about the relationship between forensic testing and the MPD's ability to refer cases for prosecution. That is a somewhat difficult question to assess. There are very few cases in which DNA or other forensic evidence is the sole basis for prosecution. Typically, forensics represents one element of the total evidentiary package in any particular case. That said, there are certainly cases where DNA, for example, is the foundation for a case, and moving forward depends on the forensic evidence. Our inability to analyze this evidence in a timely manner can delay our ability to move forward on some cases.

Perhaps the larger technical limitation involves our inability under the current arrangement to take full advantage of the CODIS system – the repository of DNA samples that has been so beneficial in identifying offenders and solving cases nationally. Currently, in many of our cases, the FBI Crime Lab is able to conduct DNA analyses only when we have a suspect in a case. As such, the DNA test is used largely to confirm the involvement of an already identified suspect. That is certainly beneficial – in fact, essential – in these types of cases. However, if our department had our own, fully functional crime lab, we would be able to conduct many more “cold-hit” analyses, in which DNA recovered at a crime scene is tested against the national repository. If the experiences of Virginia and other jurisdictions are any guide, I am quite confident that this would result in more offenders being arrested and more cases being solved. In addition to being a benefactor of CODIS, the District of Columbia could also become a more frequent contributor to the national system – something that would benefit other, particularly neighboring jurisdictions as well.

Unnecessary delays or missed opportunities in moving forward with criminal prosecutions can harm not only the victims or the survivors, who are seeking justice and some measure of “closure.” They can also endanger the community at large, as offenders continue to commit crimes while the earlier case against them is being built. That is why I believe so strongly that having our own dedicated crime lab has implications not only for investigating and solving crimes, but just as importantly, for preventing crime and making our communities safer.

In many respects, our Department is performing remarkably well, given the limitations we face with our crime lab resources. According to the FBI's 2005 crime statistics, which were released earlier this week, the District's clearance rates for homicide, rape, aggravated assault and burglary were all above average when compared with comparably sized cities having populations of 500,000 to 1 million. And while I am certainly pleased that our clearance rates were higher than the norm, I will never be satisfied with being just “above average.” This is the nation's capital, and we should be setting the standard when it comes to criminal investigations, crime solving and crime prevention. We cannot possibly meet that goal if we do not have our own dedicated crime lab facility.

The good news is that our city is united in our commitment to build, equip and staff a start-of-the-art crime lab facility. Our elected leaders, the business community, the Police Department, other safety and health agencies and, most importantly, our residents all recognize the need for this facility and the benefits it would bring. So moving forward with this project is not a matter of consensus or commitment, but a matter of resources. By working together – the District government and our partners in the Federal government – I am confident that we can find the resources necessary to create a facility that is fitting and appropriate for our nation's capital, and one that will help us continue to make this great city even safer and more secure. Thank you.

